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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTION DATE SLIPS AS PARLIAMENTARY PENSIONS
PREVAIL

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas N. Hull for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) While there has yet to be an official announcement, Embassy Freetown has learned that the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) intends to delay the upcoming Parliamentary and Presidential elections from July 28 until on or shortly after August 11. National Electoral Commission (NEC) Chair Dr. Christiana Thorpe reportedly met with President Kabbah and Speaker of Parliament Justice Edmund Cowan on the evening of May 3 to discuss a new date for the elections. An official announcement is expected soon, possibly as early as May 4.

¶2. (SBU) There had been widespread speculation that the GoSL would make such a move in response to mounting pressure from members of Parliament. In order to receive a lifetime monthly pension amounting to one million Leones (approximately USD 333) Parliament members must serve a full five-year term. If Parliament were dissolved before June 25, current members not seeking re-election would miss out on this benefit, since the Parliament would not have sat for a full five years.

¶3. (SBU) Many Parliamentarians have indicated they will not seek re-election due to what some believe is their unwillingness to be held accountable by constituents under the new constituency-based system. Other Parliamentarians who are seeking re-election are likely to be voted out of office because of their poor service records and inability to draw constituency support. In November 2006, Parliament accepted a NEC report recommending that elections be constituency-based. Previous elections since 1996 were based on proportional party representation, which enabled many party stalwarts to be elected to Parliament for their party loyalty. Parliamentarians were assigned constituencies after elections, and many never visited them.

¶4. (SBU) On May 4, the NEC met with political parties' representatives and proposed August 11 as the new election date. The NEC apparently voiced its concern that, in order to follow constitutional elections guidelines, it would not have sufficient time to adequately prepare between the June 25 date when President Kabbah intends to dissolve Parliament and the originally selected July 28 election day. There are significant logistical challenges. Parties have to submit all parliamentary candidates to the NEC by June 1. Subsequently, candidates have to be vetted and validated by the NEC as registered voters. Ballots then need to be printed outside the country and distributed to often remote polling stations. Consequently, the NEC apparently realized that holding elections on July 28 was simply unrealistic. Observers have commented that political parties' representatives voiced only mild disappointment with the postponement.

¶5. (SBU) NEC Chair Dr. Thorpe said that the presidential elections must be held before August 14 to uphold

presidential electoral constitutional requirements. Since August 11 is a Saturday (as was July 28), it appears that it would be the logical date to allow sufficient time to meet the logistical needs, while respecting constitutional strictures. If a run-off presidential election becomes necessary (55 percent is required to win in the first round), it would most likely be held on September 8.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Most observers and donors have generally been satisfied with the pace and conduct of election preparations, including the registration process. This latest news appears to be the first real hiccup in the process. UN Executive Representative of the Secretary General (ERSG) Victor Angelo strenuously tried to persuade President Kabbah to dissolve Parliament early but was rebuffed in a tense meeting on May 2. Surprisingly, there has been relatively little opposition expressed to the postponement, although speculation abounds that this may be a ploy by the ruling SLPP to lengthen access to government coffers to fund campaigns. However, government coffers are reportedly empty as major budget support donors are freezing disbursements until after the election. Whether this is an overly cynical interpretation or not, the fact remains that the logistical constraints are real, given that Parliament is unwilling to dissolve before June 25. The main concern about the later date is that Sierra Leone will be deeper into its torrential rainy season increasing the difficulty for voters to reach polling stations on election day and for election materials to be delivered and retrieved over nearly impassable muddy roads or by UN helicopter due to low visibility. END COMMENT.
HULL